

Fergus McCaffrey is pleased to present a ten-year survey of bold and experimental works by Gutai artist Sadamasa Motonaga

Sadamasa Motonaga
Change/Continuity: New York 1966—67
November 1–December 21, 2018

Opening Reception: November 1, 2018, 6–8 PM

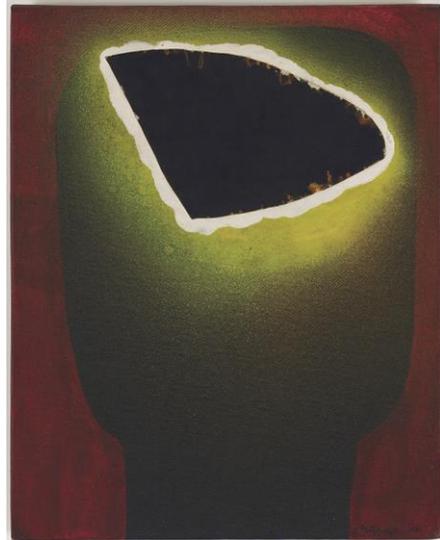
Fergus McCaffrey is pleased to present a solo exhibition surveying a pivotal decade of bold and experimental work by Sadamasa Motonaga (1922–2011). This exhibition, on view at the gallery's New York location from November 1 to December 21, 2018, focuses on Motonaga's 1966–67 visit to New York, and the influence that experience had on his life and work.

In the late 1960s and early '70s, Motonaga both participated in and broke free of Gutai activities, traveling to New York for a year in 1966–67 with his wife, artist Nakatsuji Etsuko; there Motonaga radically altered key philosophical and material components of his practice. Fergus McCaffrey's presentation shows Motonaga at the crux of Japanese art's postwar trajectory, transitioning from existential and modernist concerns, embodied in Gutai, toward a new style of apolitical visual expression that incorporated aspects of children's art and the anime of Japanese popular culture, using painting techniques borrowed from custom car culture and the street. In so doing, Motonaga erased barriers between high and low art and won recognition for a new visual art language that Takashi Murakami would later call Superflat.

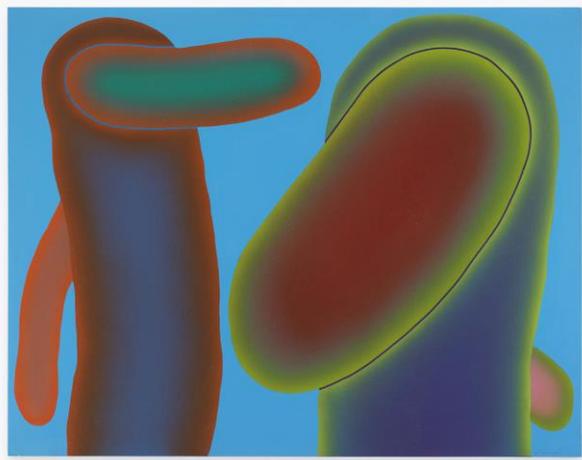


Motonaga was an early member of Gutai, joining the group in 1955. Together with other first-generation members, including Jiro Yoshihara, Kazuo Shiraga, and Saburo Murakami, Motonaga forged an ethos of artistic experimentation, freedom, and individuality in the wake of the Second World War. To break free from the conservatism and militarism of the past, Yoshihara urged his adherents to “do what has never been done before.” With this emphasis on originality, the artists responded with a wide variety of paintings, sculptures, performances, and time-based interactive works that emphasized physicality and play, putting forth an aesthetic and political message of artistic autonomy.

Originally trained as a cartoonist, Motonaga illustrated for local magazines and newspapers in the late 1940s. After studying with Gutai leader Jiro Yoshihara, he pursued a more abstract style of painting and sought to express himself by embracing what Yoshihara called “the scream of matter itself.” Motonaga always approached this mission with a sense of humor and play, blending his love of popular culture with Gutai’s modernist aspirations. In his first mature paintings, which dated from 1954, he employed a vocabulary of embryonic shapes, flying objects, and cartoon-like forms modeled in heavy oil paint. By 1957, under the influence of French critic Michel Tapié, Motonaga’s work became more abstract, with flowing lines and pools of brightly colored pigment poured and dripped onto the canvas.



Fergus McCaffrey’s exhibition begins at the height of Motonaga’s period of formalist abstraction, when, in 1962, he began adding novel materials such as pebbles and gravel to his painted surfaces. This technique is evident in the painting *Work* (1963), loaned from the Rachofsky Collection, Dallas. After only a few years of such formal material experiment, Motonaga left Japan for a residency in New York, where he worked in a studio on Chambers Street in downtown Manhattan. Perhaps because of spatial necessity, or the influences of the downtown New York scene at the time, the artist began creating works on a smaller scale, leaving behind the heroic gestures of his large canvases for more intimate explorations of anthropomorphic form. To the shock of friends and early supporters such as Martha Jackson, he abandoned his style of layering heavy spills of oil paint, instead experimenting with a lighter gesture of pouring the material from a watering can, before eventually turning to the newly developed airbrush technique. This material innovation allowed Motonaga conceptual and thematic freedom, too. After the birth of his son in New York, Motonaga’s interest in children’s art expanded, this time with a newfound seriousness. While his paintings had always possessed a fresh, childlike innocence, he now began creating imagery specifically for children, broadening his practice to include printmaking, stage design, and children’s books. Upon



returning to Japan in late 1967, he returned to his earlier style of painting pictograms and anthropomorphic forms. This time, though, the playfully ambiguous characters are modeled in luminous, smooth airbrush and Japanese ink.

After his departure from Gutai in 1971, Motonaga pushed these qualities of his work further, settling into an aesthetic of calculated lines, vaguely figurative motifs, and delicate, consistent shading executed in airbrush. While his late works have

taken decades to come to the attention of the West, they are among the most influential in Japanese art history and pop culture. Unusual, biomorphic shapes populate works such as *No. 505* (1972) and *Untitled* (1971), giving the appearance of inflated appendages, or personified amoeboid forms. Such ambiguous shapes are uniquely open to interpretation, sometimes appearing to be human body parts, other times natural phenomena. Rather than critiquing commodity culture and popular imagery, Motonaga used cultural, political, and consumerist images as a visual repertoire, providing the raw material with which to form a new language of painting.

About the Artist

Sadamasa Motonaga was born in 1922 in Mie Prefecture, where he graduated from trade school with aspirations to be a manga artist. Motonaga first began to make figural and landscape works on canvas under the tutelage of painter Mankichi Hamabe; in 1952, he began to make abstract objects and paintings, which garnered him an invitation to join the legendary Gutai Art Association (1954–72), famous for groundbreaking performance works and innovations in painting, sculpture, and installation art. Over the course of his six-decade career, Motonaga created paintings, sculptures, and performances that were fresh, jubilant, and playful. He died on October 3, 2011, in Kobe, Japan.

Motonaga's work has been the subject of many retrospective exhibitions in Japan, most notably at the Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art, Kobe, 1998; Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003; Nagano Prefectural Shinano Art Museum, 2005; and Mie Prefectural Art Museum, Tsu, 2009. The first retrospective of his work outside Japan was held at the Dallas Museum of Art in 2014, alongside that of his Gutai colleague Kazuo Shiraga. Retrospectives of the Gutai Art Association have been held at the National Gallery of Modern Art, Rome, 1990; Jeu de Paume, Paris, 1998; Lugano Cantonal Museum of Art, 2010; National Art Center, Tokyo, 2012; and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2013. His awards include the Légion d'Honneur from the French government and the Japanese Medal with Purple Ribbon; he was the first abstract artist to receive the latter.

About Fergus McCaffrey

Founded in 2006, Fergus McCaffrey is internationally recognized for its groundbreaking role in promoting the work of postwar Japanese artists such as Sadamasa Motonaga, Natsuyuki Nakanishi, Kazuo Shiraga, and Jiro Takamatsu. The gallery also exhibits the work of emerging and seminal Western artists such as Marcia Hafif, Birgit Jürgenssen, Richard Nonas, Sigmar Polke, and Carol Rama.

In keeping with its commitment to Japanese art and culture, Fergus McCaffrey opened its Tokyo gallery this past March with an exhibition of paintings by Robert Ryman, followed by an exhibition of works by Tetsumi Kudo and Carol Rama in June.

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Images:

1. Sadamasa Motonaga, *Work*, 1963. Oil and gravel on canvas, 71 5/8 x 53 1/8 (181.9 x 134.9 cm). © The Rachofsky Collection, Dallas; Courtesy of the Estate of Sadamasa Motonaga
2. Sadamasa Motonaga, *Untitled*, 1966. Liquitex on canvasboard, 10 x 7 7/8 inches (25.4 x 20.4 cm). © The Estate of Sadamasa Motonaga
3. Sadamasa Motonaga, *Untitled*, 1971. Acrylic on board, 36 1/8 x 24 7/8 inches (91.8 x 63.3 cm). © The Estate of Sadamasa Motonaga